

Grizzly Bear Recovery in the Bitterroot Ecosystem

What Does it Mean to You?

Dear Reader,

Grizzly bears are a part of America's rich wildlife heritage and once ranged throughout most of the western United States. However, distribution and population levels of this species have been diminished due to loss of habitat and eradication by people. Grizzly bears have been eliminated from all but approximately 2 percent of their historic range in the lower 48 States. Today, only 1,000 to 1,100 grizzly bears remain in a few populations in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington.

The final steps needed to begin recovery efforts for the grizzly bear in the Bitterroot Ecosystem of central Idaho and western Montana are now complete. The signing of both the Record of Decision which officially states what alternative the Service has selected to help recover grizzly bears in the Bitterroot, and the final rule which specifically describes how the Service will implement this alternative, begins the lengthy recovery process.

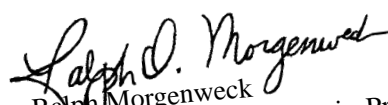
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) in March 2000 which detailed our final proposal and alternative proposals to recover a population of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem. After review of over 14,000 public comments received on the FEIS, we have prepared and signed a Record of Decision. The alternative that we have selected for implementation is Alternative 1, "Restoration of Grizzly Bears as a Nonessential Experimental Population with Citizen Management." The final special rule which specifically describes how the Service will implement the selected alternative has also been signed. Both documents have been published in the Federal Register.

Our goal in this newspaper is to share with you the important points of this grizzly bear recovery project, and to explain how they may impact you. We focus on the substantive public issues that you have raised throughout our planning process for this project, and provide information to help address your questions and concerns related to these issues.

We know that citizens hold many different viewpoints about grizzly bears and how to manage them. We have listened intently to your ideas and concerns, and have incorporated them throughout the planning process as modifications to our proposal. The final plan provides the best balance possible given the broad spectrum of viewpoints on this recovery project, and our responsibility to manage this species.

We encourage you to read on, and to continue to participate in this project as it is implemented.

Sincerely,



Ralph Morgenweck
Regional Director, Mountain-Prairie Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Record of Decision and Final Rule

Q: What is the purpose of the Record of Decision and final rule as they relate to grizzly bear recovery?

A: The Record of Decision (ROD) states and describes the alternative the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has selected to accomplish its goal to help recover grizzly bears in the lower 48 states, and specifically the Bitterroot Ecosystem.

The final rule describes specifically how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners will implement the selected alternative.

Q: Does this mean grizzly bears will be coming to the Bitterroot?

A: Yes, but not right away. For details see the Projected Implementation Timeline on page 2.

Q: What alternative was selected?

A: The Service selected Alternative 1 - Restoration of Grizzly Bears as a Nonessential Experimental Population with Citizen Management. Modifications to the alternative in response to public comment on the final EIS are documented in the Record of Decision.

Q: Why was this alternative selected?

A: This alternative offers citizens a voice in grizzly bear management through the Citizen Management Committee. This alternative also represents the environmentally preferable alternative which balances the biological needs of recovering grizzly bears and public concerns about the program.

Q: Where can you get a copy of these two documents?

A: Both documents are on the internet (www.r6.fws.gov/endspp/grizzly), available at local libraries in Idaho and Montana, and available at most U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA Forest Service offices. If you would like a copy of either document, send a request to the address listed on the back page of this newspaper. The ROD and rule were mailed to all members of the public who commented on the Environmental Impact Statement.

Please read on to learn more about the details of the selected alternative, and what the public can expect as the implementation phase begins.

History of Grizzly Bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem

Is the Grizzly Bear Native to the Bitterroot?

The grizzly bear is a native species of the Bitterroot Ecosystem and was once common there. Grizzly bears were exterminated in the Bitterroot by the mid 1940s. Their extermination resulted from hunting and other purposeful human actions.

Q: Were grizzly bears ever common in the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

A: Historically, the grizzly bear was a widespread inhabitant of the Bitterroot Mountains in central Idaho and western Montana. When Lewis and Clark traveled through the Bitterroot country in 1806, grizzly bears were abundant. They killed at least 7 grizzly bears including 1 female and 2 cubs while camped near present-day Kamiah, Idaho.

Grizzly bears were common in central Idaho until the early 1900s. William Wright, a hunter and naturalist, wrote of killing dozens of grizzly bears over several years at the turn of the century in the Bitterroot Mountains. Conservative estimates indicate trappers and hunters killed 25 to 40 grizzly bears annually in the Bitterroot Mountains during the early 1900's.

A major influx of hunters, trappers, and settlers at the turn of the century, and later sheepherders resulted in the elimination of grizzly bears from the Bitterroot Ecosystem.

Q: Do grizzly bears reside there today?

A: The last verified death of a grizzly bear in the Bitterroot Ecosystem occurred in 1932

and the last tracks were observed in 1946. Although occasional unverified reports of grizzly sightings persist in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, no verified tracks or sightings have been documented in more than 50 years.

Based on the best scientific evidence available, and the lack of verified evidence for more than 50 years, there are no grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem.

Q: Why reintroduce the grizzly bear to the Bitterroot Ecosystem?

A: Between 1800 and 1975, grizzly bear populations in the lower 48 states decreased from estimates of more than 50,000 to less than 1,000 individual bears.

The grizzly bear was listed as a threatened species in the lower 48 States under the Endangered Species Act in 1975. As such, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was mandated by Congress to conserve this listed species and the ecosystems upon which it depends. Restoration of the grizzly bear within this portion of its historical range will contribute significantly to long-term conservation and recovery of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 states.

The Bitterroot Ecosystem is one of the largest contiguous blocks of undeveloped federal land remaining in the lower 48 United States. Of all remaining unoccupied grizzly bear habitat in the lower 48 States, this area in the Bitterroot Mountains has the best potential for recovery of a healthy population of grizzly bears with minimal impact to humans. This is primarily due to the large wilderness area.

A Letter from Bud Moore

I was born October 19, 1917 at the logging, railroad and farming village of Florence, Montana... By 1922, our family had settled on an 80-acre homestead in the Lolo Creek Valley where we lived until the early 1930s. We made our living by limited agriculture, logging, and wood cutting, and hunting and trapping. The then wild expanse of the Bitterroots stretched from our pasture fence westward over 100 miles to the Camas Prairies of Idaho's Clearwater Country. Prominent among that land's natural virtues, it was, in the 1920s, grizzly country.

Grizzlies were common in the backcountry but, in retrospect, not as abundant as we thought they were. We rarely saw or heard of one in the settled valleys but would find their tracks and occasionally encounter grizzlies in the more remote mountains. ... the grizzlies showed little inclination to venture near the farms and hamlets of the Bitterroot Valley.

... As the family hunter, I killed several bears but never a grizzly. Perhaps due to the local woodsmen's talk, I feared the grizzlies at first but later learned that if I left them alone they would leave me alone. In a way, they became for me friends to be respected as the dominant life in the Bitterroot Mountains. I thought I was destined to grow up with these big bears when, in truth, I was witnessing their last stand in the Bitterroots. They were gone by the mid 1940s.

With the grizzlies gone the Bitterroots became a diminished ecosystem for me and many others, a lesser place than the vibrant web of life that inspired me to cross the mountains from Montana into the Clearwater Country. I miss those grizzlies. The Bitterroot Ecosystem needs them to become whole again. And now we have a chance to bring the big bears home.

... I am excited about the potential return of the bears to this place long degraded by their absence. Yet, I am also aware of the fears, frustrations and forthright resistance of some people, agencies and institutions to restoring grizzlies to the Bitterroots. Some of us want the bears. Others do not. And I hope that we- those for, against and interested - can ... reason together to find the common ground needed to successfully implement this plan.

I favor Alternative 1... because it would, like the Bitterroot Ecosystem did for me so many years ago, generate a positive sense of friendship and stewardship between the people, the bears and the ecosystems. Grizzlies would become more our bears, less government bears. Their habitat (ecosystem) would be more our responsibility, managed by positive partnership with our government. Local economies and various activities of the citizens in the ecosystem could be addressed more specifically. And the principles of democracy at the grassroots are more apt to flourish when grizzly tracks again show in the Bitterroots under joint citizen-government stewardship.

... My wife Janet and I live in Montana's Swan Valley where grizzlies remain respected friends much like they were years ago in the Bitterroots. We don't fear the bears. Quite the opposite, we steward our personal forestland with first priority to sustain the integrity of the ecosystems including a friendly place for bears. For us, the ecological, economic and spiritual benefits of living with grizzlies outweigh by far the few constraints needed to protect the bears from drawing too close to people, property and human foods.

Beyond that, our community, small private and industrial land owners and government agencies collaborate in managing bear-friendly ecosystems. ... To help apply and sustain ecosystem management in the grizzly country remains for me a fulfilling destiny. I am grateful.

Bud Moore, Condon, MT, 59826

6/14/2000



Bud Moore is author of The Lochsa Story, Land Ethics in the Bitterroot Mountains. He grew up in the shadow of the Bitterroots, and spent a large part of his 40-year career with the U.S. Forest Service at the Powell Ranger Station of the Clearwater National Forest.